

of the MBTA

It was night, and Central Square was largely empty. A few cars drove down the street, a few guys loitered outside the bars, a few lights were on in windows, but the city was quietly shutting down. I walked down the steps into the subway, paid my fare, and began looking for a place to sit and read.

I found a bench, another kid sitting at the opposite side, and took my seat. “Spare a dollar?” the kid asked. “Sorry,” I said, “spent everything I have to get in here.” “Man, wish I had five bucks,” he said. “If I had that I’d be out there grabbing a meal. I haven’t eaten in like two days.”

I tried to read my book but he wanted to talk. “You just come back from school?” he asked. “No,” I said, “I was visiting a friend.” “Oh, I thought you were at school ‘cause of the book.” “Oh, I’ve been carrying this around all day,” I said. “What is it?” he asked. “It’s a book about books,” I said. He laughed. “I thought it was a bible or something.”

“You heading to Alewife?” I asked. “No,” he said, laughing. “I’m staying right here.” I blinked twice and began to realize what he meant. He wasn’t asking for money because he’d been out all night and spent the cash his parents gave him. He was asking for money because he was homeless. And with fits and starts, he told me a little of his story as I waited for the train.

He grew up with his family in New Hampshire. They were “rich” then, at least by comparison, lived in a real “mansion”. Inspectors started coming around to check out the house, three in one month. Finally a man came to tell them the bad news. “You have to move out,” he said. “The house is infested with termites; it’ll collapse within months.” “What are you talking about?” his mom responded. “This place is fine; inspectors have been looking it all over.” The man picked up a large hammer, lifted it above his head and struck a mighty blow — at the wall. The drywall broke away to reveal termites filling the insides, eating away at the wood.

They had to leave fast, didn’t even have time to pack stuff. The bulldozers came the next day, turned the whole thing into rubble. They also bulldozed his mom’s car, where she kept all the money. They were homeless and penniless. The Department of Social Services picked up his five-year-old brother, insisted on \$100 fee if they wanted to regain custody. “If I had that kind of money,” he explained, “I’d be eating with it.”

So he decided to start hitchhiking, head to Cambridge where he had some family. Caught a ride in the back of a UPS truck, then after that dropped him off, waited for another hour or two in the middle of nowhere before he could find someone else. Finally he found his way to part of the Boston subway system, where he managed to sneak his way through the turnstiles. Now he could ride all around town, get to Cambridge, where he set up base in Central Square.

“Mostly I just sit here,” he explained. “Sometimes I just ride the trains all day, Braintree to Alewife and back. Found a violin some guy had lost — hey, I’m homeless and you’re not — and started playing it for money, but the cops picked me up for performing without a license and threw me in jail for the night. Just because I’m a homeless kid you’re going to throw me in jail? Anyway, I make more money than that just telling jokes.”

“Pretty absurd, actually. Spent all day here asking folks for spare change, nobody could spare a thing. Here I am, homeless kid in Cambridge, and nobody even has a couple spare pennies!”

To outward appearances he seems like a normal kid with a bit of an army look. His hair is buzzed, he wears a wifebeater shirt with an army jacket and baggy army pants. At first I thought this was just a style, but actually it’s utilitarian — everything he owns is in the pockets of those pants. He showed me what he had.

“Stole this from a friend today,” he said, pulling something out from under his jacket. “Brand new CD player, awesome headphones, full batteries, great CD inside.” He began playing it for me; it was rap songs: Ridin’ and Eminem. “And check out this he said,” before pulling out a PSP. “Got this when we were rich, but can’t use it for much now; had to sell all our games so we could try to find a house.” He popped it open. “See, no cartridges. Still, I borrow some from friends sometimes.”

There was a pause, as Eminem came out of his headphones, which he’d cranked all the way up so I could listen. “Man, imagine if Eminem were right here now, all those girls shaking their asses by him. Wouldn’t that be crazy?” “Crazier things have happened,” I said. “Lots of famous people go to Harvard Square.” “Yeah,” he said, “Beyonce was there the other week — came in for a wedding or something — it was like a mob scene, people jumping all over her.”

He often took the conversation in the direction of such imaginations — what if a celebrity popped up here? He talked about how he used to play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* with a cheat code to make celebrities appear in the game. But aside from these discursions, he was remarkably cogent, pretty sane for someone in such a screwed-up situation.

“Man, my life sucks,” he said after a pause. “If you could do anything, what would you do?” I asked. “If I could do anything?” he said. “Yeah.” “Man, I’d be back at home with my mom and brothers and family and stuff.”

He begun telling me something about his mom — how she’d managed to recover one of her debit cards from the rubble of her car and bought a new house, but never told him about it, he’d only heard rumor of it third-hand, how she’d put her own child out on the street to fend for himself, but I couldn’t quite hear him because the train pulled up as he was talking. He finally stopped talking, but I strained, waiting for more. “That’s your train,” he finally said, “you better catch it.” “Sorry,” I said, walking towards it.

I grabbed a seat, hearing “Spare change? Spare change?” as the doors closed and we pulled away. I started trying to read my book, but found I wasn’t really capable of reading anything at all.

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